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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SAKASHVILI SOFTENS HIS TONE, BUT DIALOGUE WITH  
THE OPPOSITION BREAKS DOWN

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Dialogue between the government, represented by Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze, and the government's political opposition began after the unrest of November 7. President Saakashvili has been reaching out to various constituencies in public appearances that are seemingly aimed at changing perceptions that he is out of touch with the public. The new Prime Minister, Lado Gurgendidze, has pledged to take the public's views into account in formulating his policies. Parliament is quickly moving to enact many of the electoral changes demanded by the opposition. However, Burjanadze suspended formal discussions with the opposition on November 19 because she objects to their constantly changing demands and the introduction of a negotiator who is suspected of cooperating with the Russians. She believes the opposition is not serious about negotiations, and is simply marking time until a new protest rally scheduled for November 25. End Summary.

#### President Saakashvili Encourages Dialogue

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¶2. (SBU) President Saakashvili and Prime Minister-nominee Lado Gurgendidze held a televised meeting November 19 where the two discussed their priorities for the future course of the Georgian government. In particular, Gurgendidze stressed three major goals: continued economic growth, creation of jobs, and support for social programs targeting the most vulnerable in Georgia. Gurgendidze announced planned increases to pensions and teachers' salaries. His ideas seemed to resonate with the majority of Georgians who are disgruntled by the disparity between increasing state revenues and decreasing real household income.

¶3. (SBU) The most interesting part of the televised discussion was Saakashvili's emphatic instructions to Gurgendidze to maintain a constant dialogue with the population-at-large. Saakashvili stressed that any government plans must be communicated clearly "in simple, understandable language." He underscored that feedback from the Georgian people was of paramount importance and the "distance between the government and the population was to be zero."

¶4. (SBU) In response to the President's instructions, Gurgendidze stated in a separate interview later November 19 that his governing style would be very open and he was ready to have an open dialogue with the opposition, non-governmental sector and the media.

#### Opposition and Ruling Party Need Dialogue

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¶5. (SBU) Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze has been engaged in a series of meetings with the United National Coalition of Opposition (UNC) leaders, the main instigators of the recent Tbilisi protests. As a result of those talks, parliamentary committees are already considering a number of amendments to the Election Code, including more significant measures that require constitutional changes.

¶6. (SBU) However, the UNC leaders have continued to make additional demands during the discussions, and made statements that there is "little sense" in continuing the dialogue when the opposition's main demands are not being met. On November 19, the UNC also called for a new protest rally on November 25. This led Burjanadze to question the real intent of the opposition leaders, who, she feels, are presenting "ever changing new demands" and actually prefer to return to street actions instead of continuing the dialogue.

¶7. (SBU) Burjanadze suspended the dialogue on November 19 because the opposition desired to substitute Goga Khaindrava for Salome Zurabichvili as a negotiator while Zurabichvili is in Europe. Khaindrava, although a member of the United Council of the opposition, is unacceptable to Burjanadze because he is under a cloud of suspicion of cooperation with Russian intelligence operatives. The dialogue with Burjanadze has not resumed as of November 21 and is likely to remain suspended until the rally on November 25. Burjanadze urged the Georgian people to ask questions about the opposition's motives, and offered assurances she will do what she can to keep the situation "as stable as possible".

¶8. (SBU) While the recent initiatives to foster dialogue by the President and the Speaker are laudable (and some would argue, overdue), compromise is not guaranteed. The opposition is skeptical of the timing of the Prime Minister's replacement, viewing new PM Lado Gurgenedze as a "stop-gap" temporary measure to "embellish" the government's image before the elections. Also, the opposition continues to be confrontational during the dialogue process.

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